

6. CULTURAL RESOURCES

6.1 PREHISTORY AND HISTORY OF BALLONA WETLANDS

Archaeological evidence suggests that significant human occupation of the Ballona Wetlands area began between 7,000 and 6,000 years ago. At that time, settlement appears to have been limited mainly to the bluff tops, overlooking what was at that time a shallow lagoon that had formed during the early Holocene (Section 3). This pattern of bluff-top settlement increased for the next few thousand years, such that by about 3,000 years ago several large settlements had been established along the bluffs south of Ballona Wetlands.

By 3,000 years ago, accumulating sediments had reduced the size of the prehistoric lagoon and created expanses of tidal marshes around the inland margins (Section 3). While the bluff-top sites continued to be occupied, new settlements began to appear in the lowlands along Ballona Creek and Centinela Creek. Paleoenvironmental reconstruction based on sediment cores suggest that much of the project area was still covered by open water at this time. However, as sediment continued to accumulate on the eastern margin of the lagoon, the lowlands were increasingly utilized, and by about 1,000 years ago several settlements had been established in the lowland areas.

At approximately 1,000 years ago, however, a more significant settlement shift took place at Ballona Wetlands, in that the extensive bluff-top settlements appear to have been abandoned and a series of discrete components were established in the lowlands closer to the lagoon edge. Because until recently the Late Prehistoric record in the lowlands has been limited, it was suggested either that occupation of the area was reduced at this time, or that populations were aggregating at an as-yet undiscovered Late Prehistoric village (Altschul et al., 2005). The recent discovery at CA-LAN-62 of a major cemetery dating to the Late Prehistoric and post-contact times seems most consistent with the latter hypothesis, in that a significant degree of settlement organization and aggregation in the Late Prehistoric is implied.

At historic contact, the Ballona Wetlands area was occupied by the Tongva (also known as the Gabrielino), who controlled most of the Los Angeles Basin. They lived in a series of politically autonomous villages along the major drainages and in favorable locations along the coast, with each village inhabited by about 50 to 200 people (Bean and Smith, 1978). Subsistence resources included a wide variety of plants and animals, with the acorn a primary staple. Wetland areas along the coast such as Ballona Wetlands provided shellfish, fish, small game, medicinal plants, and reeds as building materials (Martin Acala, personal communication). Evidence of Protohistoric (A.D. 1769-1800) and early historic (A.D. 1800-1850) occupation in Ballona Wetlands has until recently been limited to Mission period shell and trade beads, butchered bone, and a few very late radiocarbon dates (Altschul et al., 2003, 2005). However, continued excavations at CA-LAN-62, immediately east of the project area along Centinela Creek, have now revealed a major Native American cemetery that dates primarily to this period. Although analysis of these materials is ongoing, it is likely that the cemetery and other deposits in CA-LAN-262 represent a major Tongva settlement. Likely candidates

would include Sa'angna or Guaspita, both of which are reputed by some sources to have been located in Ballona Wetlands (Altschul et al., 2003).

Euroamerican occupation of the Ballona Wetlands area began in the latter half of the 19th century with the development of the small community of Machado, located along Ballona Creek to the east of the project area, which became known as Rancho La Ballona. During the 1920's and 1930's, the project area was used for agriculture by a community of ethnic Japanese farmers, although this was curtailed shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In 1941, large areas of Ballona Wetlands were purchased by Hughes Aircraft, which developed a large-scale manufacturing operation near the project area.

6.2 KNOWN RESOURCES IN THE PROJECT AREA

Archaeologists first visited Ballona Wetlands and adjacent bluff tops nearly 100 years ago, and since then have identified numerous prehistoric deposits. Recent syntheses of the work conducted for the Playa Vista development in Ballona Wetlands (Altschul et al., 1992; Altschul and Grenda, 2002; Altschul et al., 2003) document at least 14 archaeological sites in the vicinity of the present project area. These sites reveal important land use changes that relate to both social and environmental forces occurring over the past 6,500 years.

The project area is within the Ballona Lagoon Archaeological District, a National Register-eligible district that includes large portions of Ballona Wetlands and adjacent bluff tops (Altschul et al., 2003). Of the cultural sites that have been identified within the lowlands, three (CA-LAN-54, -62, and -2676) are within or near the present project area. CA-LAN-54 is within Area C along Culver Boulevard. Consisting of artifacts and shellfish remains, this small site is thought to have been established before about 1,000 years ago. It has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, and was subjected to data recovery in 2002 as part of the proposed widening of Culver Boulevard (report pending).

CA-LAN-2676 is located just east of Area B, near Lincoln Boulevard. Tested in 1999, this site is interpreted as a short-term resource processing area in a disturbed context. Also just outside the project area is CA-LAN-62, an extensive and highly significant prehistoric deposit containing a major mortuary complex. This deposit extends more than three km along the base of the bluffs east of Lincoln Boulevard and is the subject of ongoing data recovery by Statistical Research, Inc. To date, nearly 400 human burials have been identified at the site, most of which appear to date to the Late Prehistoric or Mission periods (Robert Dorame, personal communication). A variety of artifacts, including Mission-era beads and other items, have also been recovered. The clustering of most of the burials within a limited area indicates it to be a discrete cemetery and implies a degree of settlement organization at Ballona at that time.

Based on current information, only one known site (CA-LAN-54) is within the project area. Although this site has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, it has been subjected to additional data recovery investigations that have removed additional deposits. Data presented in the final report of these investigations, currently in preparation by Statistical Research, Inc., will clarify whether additional investigations would be necessary for the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project.

It is important to note that continued sediment accumulation during the late Holocene may have buried significant cultural deposits. In lowland alluvial areas such as the project area, such deposits could occur at substantial depth, and may be encountered during any site excavations (depending on site design) elsewhere within the project area.